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ABSTRACT

A discussion is presented on eliminating the current fragmentation of the undergraduate liberal education curriculum and developing a curriculum by building curricular areas not around disciplines but around questions, problems, and enduring ideas for constructive social change. A description is given of three exemplary projects developed to improve college curriculum: The Project on General Education Models (GEM), sponsored by the Society for Values in Higher Education; The American College Testing Program/College Outcome Measures Project (ACT/COMP); and The Academic Program Evaluation Project (APEP), sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. (JD)

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GENERAL EDUCATION:

THE OSCILLATION OF THE

CANIS FAMILIARIS

BY ITS TERMINAL APPENDAGE

by

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Historically, general education programs at colleges and universities have been held accountable for providing students with a curricular experience designed as the sine qua non of the undergraduate enterprise. As a result of institutions responding to pressures to serve both history and the future through their curricula, they have, in many cases, come to look upon the curriculum's common core, or general education components, as a vulnerable fortress to be bulwarked and made impregnable against any force which might be perceived as a threat to its aims.

To many in academe, general education has come to be looked upon as a hedge against degree "inflation." That is, it is seen as ensuring that an institution's graduates have been academically liberated and that some semblance of quid pro quo is associated with today's, tomorrow's, and yesterday's baccalaureate degree.

Consequently, curriculum committees have viewed general education as an academic insurance policy, if you will, and have concluded that the easiest way to consummate the terms of the policy (thus producing "educated" people) is by inflicting a well-rounded curriculum upon their students.[1]

Many from within and outside the liberal arts would agree that merely being introduced to the several areas of the curriculum does not necessarily engender a student's liberal education. This is evidenced by increasing numbers of academics who express embarrassment concerning the quality of their institution's bachelor's degree recipients. This embarrassment is not newfound nor is it unfounded. For, on an almost cyclical basis, with each succeeding generation of graduates, the embarrassed critics urge for some new means of buttressing the general education bastion.

Depending upon the level of credibility these critics hold with the remainder of the academic community, general education programs are scrutinized, tinkered with, renovated, and in some rare instances, even innovated in an effort to guarantee that the goals of general education will be attained.

Departmental faculties tend to perceive their general education course offerings (especially those courses which are required of all students) as fiefdoms to be protected at all costs because of the pervasive syndrome which

equates student-credit-hour-production with the justification for faculty retention.[2]

For example, between 1969 and 1976, those students taking concentrations in the humanities fell from 9 to 5 percent of the total undergraduate enrollment in the United States, and even more dramatically, in the social sciences from 18 to 8 percent. Enrollments in the physical and biological sciences increased to equal the number of social science majors in 1976. Combined, the sciences grew by about 25 percent. Meanwhile, proportions of the teaching faculty, 19 and 12 percent in the social sciences and the humanities respectively, have remained virtually unchanged and faculty in the undergraduate professional fields have increased only slightly from 32 to 37 percent. A small wonder that certain departments are perceived as having more than a casual interest in an institution's general education program.[3]

Confronted by seemingly intransigent faculties with apparent vested interest in preserving the general education status quo, the remainder of the faculty-at-large, because they see general education as comprising only one-fourth to one-third of the total undergraduate curriculum, begin to perceive themselves as the proverbial dog being wagged by its tail.

While most would agree with the concept that general education programs are held in common as institution-wide programs and rest in the hands of the full faculty, many faculty members feel disenfranchised from the general education decision-making process.

This feeling of being on the "outside" gives rise to the factionalizing of faculties, turf protecting, and obstructionism. While, at the same time, those who feel on the "inside" of the general education scene draw their wagons into an even tighter circle as if to repel an ominous onslaught.

And so the cycle continues. . .

Toward Balance in the Curriculum

An issue of long-standing in higher education has been the question of balance within the curriculum concerning general education vis-a-vis specialization. Few disagree with the obvious merits of each component but many disagree when a subjective determination of balance must be made.[4]

On this point, Clarence H. Faust observes that there is a complete lack of communication between proponents of these two philosophies since they begin with separate assumptions and reach opposed conclusions.[5] Consequently, while the controversy continues over these two ideologies less progress is made in coming to grips with one of the urgent educational questions of our time.

An attempt must continually be made to uncover, thoroughly analyze, and to think through questions in this area toward acquiring more information with respect to the relationship of specialized training in liberal education.[6] For, the solution might emerge in the form of an institutional agreement specifying "proper" balance and articulation between the two emphases.[7]

The knowledge explosion, social pressures, ecological pressures upon the environment, student demand, and the demand for increased technological competencies have also played a major role in the evolution of current programs.[8] As a result of these pressures, courses in the curriculum must constantly undergo scrutiny toward their updating to guard against their becoming obsolete. The resulting dilemma is the interrelation of (and the priorities accorded to) the various phases of college and university functions.[9]

In the case of the escalating knowledge explosion, William DeVane notes that it is the primary task of all liberal arts institutions to continually rethink and reconstruct the curriculum. He states that the danger in the older, mainly verbal education is a loss of vitality and relevance which may lead to stagnation. The danger in new developments, mainly mathematical and scientific, may be in the possibility of overwhelming the old and creating a new imbalance.[10] A balanced curriculum, fair to both old and new, must be designed which includes the older liberating studies along with the necessary bases of academic thought.[11] Generally, we need to redefine and balance common experience, breadth, and depth in the curriculum within both general education and particular major fields since it is not, at present, adequately defined and specified.[12]

Over a number of years, the haphazard development of a specific institution may result in a dissonance between its traditional purposes or mission and its actual educational programs. Value judgments requiring a clarification of philosophy and the determination of policy through appropriate program review procedures should be made by the faculty regarding the proper relationship between liberal and specialized education.[13]

On this point, Clark Kerr sees the balance in the curriculum as ever-changing. He feels that the essence of curricular balance is to pursue equilibrium between the intellectual creativity of subject fields, the needs for the highest level of skills, and the requisite of expert service to current society. Balance within the curriculum, he states, requires a shifting set of judgments relating to the possibilities inherent in each field, while preserving the essential integrity of all fields. Consequently, the only decision that can be made, he goes on, is that it would be a mistake to preserve today's balance in the curriculum for tomorrow's

world.[14]

Martin Loeb reinforces Kerr's opinion by adding that institutional balance should not be a matter of keeping one side down to make both sides even. It may require looking for reorganization of traditional departments or using techniques to bring out strengths that have been hitherto hidden. Balance, however, may not necessarily be a useful criterion. We need to find ways of maintaining an adaptive organization alert to problems of the past, problems of the present, and probabilities of the future.[15]

In order to solve the problem of balance within the curriculum, Dressel made an early attempt to develop a statement of principles that might serve to govern the development of the undergraduate curriculum. These principles were aimed at minimizing the distinction between liberal and vocational programs; restricting the range of courses offered; encouraging more qualitative student and faculty planning and advising; and suggesting budgetary and administrative procedures which might reinforce curricular principles.[16]

John Corson, from an administrative perspective, notes that the administrator's task of ensuring balanced curricular offerings is often thwarted because of the personal research interests of professors. Such interests usually result in the inclusion of a course in a department's offerings. A collection of these courses may not serve the students' best interests in terms of providing them with a greater grasp of the world's knowledge.[17]

General Education Vs. Departmentalization

General education, suggests Stanley Idzerda, was a response to four problems created by institutions of higher learning.[18] The first is the "intellectual smorgasbord" of the free elective system which gives no assurance of educational balance since (second) vocational offerings are just about as common on small liberal arts college campuses as at other institutions. Third, there exists the assumption that each student is being prepared to pursue a specialty in graduate school and must be narrowed into a specialized major field. Finally, the social composition of the campus is being changed by the comprehensive, urban public high school which is sending enormous numbers of students on to college. As a result of the responses to these problems, courses were lumped together under the heading of general education and survey courses were instituted which gave students a "smattering" of knowledge in several dissociated fields resulting in a broader curriculum but also, as he states, a "flabbier" one.[19]

In an attempt to stress educational rigor during the late 50's and early 60's, the standard course was made more difficult, but this emphasis was not always carefully thought out. All too often it was a mindless reaction to public and official criticism.[20] This notion is stressed by Dressel and DeLisle as they state that most educational ideas are not new except for a particular institution which happens to be in the process of adopting a change.[21] Much of what is termed as innovation is merely the careless adoption of a fad and should be more aptly termed renovation. Consequently, innovation in the true sense of the word, can come about only when ideas, practices, and programs are organized in new and creative manners into some sort of coherent "whole" which facilitates student learning. This sort of fundamental change is rare.[22]

The curriculum is, in almost all cases, a product of historic accretion rather than a product of contemporary design. New courses are added carelessly and virtually nothing is discarded.[23] Although bureaus or offices of institutional research already exist on many campuses, this type of organized inquiry is still generally the exception rather than the rule. On every campus, more of our academicians should concern themselves with basic questions of form and function in higher education.[24]

Recent developments such as the increase in departmental size and the number of courses offered should point out the decline of pure liberal education. These increases make it difficult to achieve any unity or significant sharing of educational experiences in the undergraduate curriculum. If general degree requirements become extensive, requests to waive some of these requirements are soon made by certain departments. When this happens there begins to be a tendency to set up a common but more limited set of requirements for all curricula.[25] There should be a general rule in this regard stating that no department (especially those in liberal arts institutions) can afford to offer more than one and one-half times the number of courses actually required for a major. This allows ample breath for students' individual differences yet keeps the number of courses within managable proportions.[26]

One way of breaking down departmentalization in order to provide a somewhat broader general education or interdisciplinary program, is to introduce the divisional organization to the institution.[27] At most colleges a student is required to take specific courses and is required to complete a major. Also, the department, as the primary unit in the college, has developed a tendency to detach the faculty from advising students on matters other than the selection of courses in their own department.[28]

With careful planning, the curriculum could be made broader and at the same time more useful (in itself, or as a base for advanced work) than it now is. When such a functional and rational curriculum is designed with flexibility and concern for the wide range of abilities of students, the proper choice of its component courses will be an easy matter. Such a curriculum will find acceptance only if a willingness is shown by vested interest groups to yield some of their departmental sovereignty.[29]

When one turns to the liberal arts/general education curriculum while considering the dynamic changes continually taking place within American society, he is very often disappointed to find that the structure of the curriculum reflects the history of departmental disciplines and the organization of graduate schools of several generations ago. It appears that all things that are known are made to fit neatly within departmental compartments. The organization of the curriculum, its courses, and the subject area dealt with by these courses, are not determined by the urgent realities of the world but rather by the internal evolution of the academic disciplines themselves.[30]

More specifically, institutional change as a result of faculty interests, publicity, institutional and departmental prestige, opportunism, and response to external and internal pressures has come about much more frequently than change due to qualitative deliberation based upon educational goals, social needs, and the abilities and goals of students.[31]

Louis Mayhew, concomitantly, states that the liberal arts curriculum is an extraordinarily effective demonstration of cultural lag. Practitioners of academic subjects struggle for years to make their subject areas respectable enough for inclusion within the college curriculum. Once this is achieved these subjects continue even though the reasons for their existence have long disappeared.[32] For, when one analyzes the course offerings of a liberal arts curriculum it is often discovered that there are easily identified parts of the curriculum which should be eradicated for the good of the entire organism.[33]

Paul Dressel suggests a number of curricular generalizations which have emerged. He states that in the short run, colleges may resist external demands for curricular change but in the long run the program of the college tends to be molded largely by the demands of its supporting clientele. Occupational specialities seem to find a degree of prestige associated with college curricula identified as being preparatory to their respective fields. Thus, the curriculum tends to expand and this expansion furthers the blending of vocational and liberal educational goals. The resulting increase in departmental size reinforces the

pattern of the course/credit concept to such an extent that professors and students alike increasingly tend to see the course as an end in itself rather than one of the components out of which the total curricular experience is built.[34] In a later work, Dressel stated further that there has been a tendency for each department's faculty to concentrate within its own discipline and this tends to eliminate any opportunity for the student to integrate or interrelate his knowledge of several disciplines.[35]

Toward the Assessment of General Education

At a recent national conference of the Association for General and Liberal Studies, making reference to the Harvard Plan to reform its general education program a keynote speaker remarked that ". . . there is a lot less going on here than meets the eye."

Even though the remark drew a hearty round of laughter, most in the audience could identify with the arduous task of obtaining consensus university-wide on any matter much less the revision (extensive, innovative, or otherwise) of an entire general education program.

But, as earlier implied, change should spring not only from a desire to improve a program's effectiveness, but also from scholarly inquiry which produces evidence in support of such change. For, as clearly stated in the conclusion of Missions of the College Curriculum; A Contemporary Review with Suggestions by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; "If colleges cannot define what they intend to accomplish in general education, cannot specifically describe how it will benefit the students who engage in it, and cannot deliver an effective general education component, they should seriously consider eliminating it entirely."[36]

In an attempt to confront the problem of assessing student outcomes in general education, several projects have been generated by such organizations as the Society for Values in Higher Education, the American College Testing Program, and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

The Project on General Education Models (GEM) is sponsored by the Society for Values in Higher Education and is a three-year project supported by grants totaling $460,000 from the Exxon Foundation and the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. It was established to create a national consortium of 14 diverse institutions in the process of developing new or strengthening existing general education programs.

The first issue of the GEM Newsletter stated that ". . . curricula frequently are designed for the convenience and interest of the faculty and often are perpetuated because of the tradition and politics of the institution." Consequently, this project was designed to stimulate actual changes in curricular and related areas and ". . . to keep the primacy of the student and his/her learning uppermost in the minds of the participants."[37]

The GEM Project has produced thus far, in addition to institution-specific information, a Student Questionnaire Form designed to assess the experiences and attitudes of students concerning the general education program of their institutions, and a Faculty Interview Form designed to examine among faculty their experiences with and attitudes toward general education and to assess their perceived roles in the general education of their students.

The American College Testing Program/College Outcome Measures Project (ACT/COMP) was begun in 1976 ". . . to design, develop, validate, and implement assessment instruments and procedures to measure and evaluate certain kinds of knowledge and skills that undergraduates are expected to acquire as a result of general education. . . that are believed necessary for successful functioning in adult society."[38] The Project's three assessment instruments were designed to evaluate six areas of general knowledge and skills; communicating, solving problems, clarifying values, functioning within social institutions, using science and technology, and using the arts, and have been field tested by more than 70 institutions. The assessment instruments include a composite examination, an objective test, and an activity inventory.

The Academic Program Evaluation Project (APEP) sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities with a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education is a two and one-half year project which focuses upon the learning outcomes of general education, particularly those college-level attainments of abilities associated with communicating, quanitifying, analyzing, and synthesizing at ten diverse public institutions.

The evaluation approach being used is one described in the Association's guidebook on program evaluation entitled Paradigm for Program Evaluation. This paradigm is a four-stage process which enables administrators and faculty members to define conceptually and behaviorally, institution-specific definitions of the four outcome areas, establish levels of performance for each of these areas, assess where within the curriculum these skills are taught, and design an evaluation plan to examine the institution's ability to promote these skills.[39]

Conclusion

Alexander Astin, in his study entitled "The American Freshman: The National Norms for Fall, 1977," sponsored by the American Council on Education, stated that nearly 71 percent of the 198,641 full-time freshmen entering 374 representative institutions for the first time in the Fall of 1977 specified that a very important reason for deciding to go to college was to ". . . gain a general education."[40]

In addition, a paper entitled "Measurable Outcomes in the Liberal Arts" by William Cook and James Gonyea published by Chronicle Guidance Publications in 1978, provides some interesting insights.[41] This paper states that according to a recent survey, more than 40 percent of math/science professors specifically teach communication and coordinating skills. Concomitantly, 83 percent of humanities professors specifically teach research skills. Also, in the social sciences, 71 percent of the respondents teach communications and examining skills. Generally then, more than half (52 percent to 87 percent) of all liberal arts faculty reported teaching specific skills within five broad skill areas. Interestingly, it appears that the natural sciences faculty and the humanities/social science faculty are promoting skills which have been traditionally seen as not being within their formal academic domain thus improving the likelihood of evolving meaningful interdisciplinary or integrative general education programs.

The irrelevance of higher education, as noted by David B. Truman, rests upon the structure (or non-structure) of the curriculum. Perhaps it should be constructed around a system of priorities designed and pursued through collaborative efforts.[42]

What we label a curriculum actually resembles a kaleidoscope which evolved largely due to chance because of the absence of a consistent design. It seems that each segment of our curriculum has been allowed to exist in relative isolation because only partial coherence has been imposed by departments or disciplines. Since these segments are still only slightly larger fragments, they provide no collective means of achieving the collective goals of general education.[43]

It is believed that if one of the goals of higher education is to function as society's instrument for continous, constructive self-criticism and social change, then perhaps the fragmented nature of the curriculum can be eliminated by building curricular areas not around disciplines but around questions, around problems, and around enduring ideas.

The general education curriculum is an institution's key means to fulfilling its goals. These goals very often have been obscured because of the diverse and autonomous nature of institutions of higher education and the fact that each has its own unique historical origin, evolution, locale, and clientele.

These factors, in combination, tend to affect the impact the undergraduate general education experience has upon individual students.

The issues are unavoidable. What is the effect of our general education programs upon our students' lives? How might we evaluate our program effectiveness? How might principled, non-threatening, and academically defensible changes be promoted?

As the old saying goes, ". . . many are too busy expending energy on the pursuit of happiness to enjoy the happiness of the pursuit." Perhaps then, we should not lose sight of the possibility that the pursuit of the process of assessing general education may <u>not</u> be any more important than the process of the pursuit itself.

Notes

[1]Martin B. Loeb. "How Can the Undergraduate College Introduce Innovations and Effect New Developments Which Reflect Present and Future Responsibilities Without Destroying Institutional Balance?" in Current Issues in Higher Education. Washington, D.C.: Association for Higher Education, 1964, p. 65.

[2]L. Jackson Newell. "Moving a Liberal Education Program From Adoption to Implementation: New Forces and New Issues" in Interdisciplinary Perspectives. Boston: Association for General and Liberal Studies, Winter, 1979, p. 27.

[3]Robert Hassenger. "The Liberal Arts as a Disaster Area" in Change. New Rochelle, N.Y.: The Council on Learning, June-July, 1978, pp. 72-73.

[4]Paul L. Dressel and Frances H. DeLisle. Undergraduate Curriculum Trends. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1969, p. 4.

[5]Clarence H. Faust. "Specialization and Liberal Arts" in Twenty-five Years: 1945-1970, edited by G. Kerry Smith. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1970, pp. 49-50.

[6]Ibid., p. 51.

[7]Dressel and DeLisle, Undergraduate Curriculum Trends, p. 4.

[8]Ibid., p. 5.

[9]Ibid.

[10]William C. DeVane. "The College of Liberal Arts" in The Contemporary University: U.S.A. edited by Robert S. Morison. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1964, p. 9.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Paul L. Dressel. "A Look at New Curriculum Models for Undergraduate Education" in Current Issues in Higher Education. Washington, D.C.: Association for Higher Education, 1964, p. 143.

[13]Paul L. Dressel and Margaret F. Lorimer. "Institutional Self Evaluation" in Evaluation in Higher Education by Paul Dressel and Associates. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961, p. 397.

[14]Clark Kerr. "The Frantic Race to Remain Contemporary" in The Contemporary University: U.S.A. edited by Robert S. Morison. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960, pp. 26-27.

[15]Loeb. "How Can the Undergraduate College Introduce Innovations and Effect New Developments Which Reflect Present and Future Responsibilities Without Destroying Institutional Balance?", p. 65.

[16]Paul L. Dressel. The Undergraduate Curriculum in Higher Education. Washington, D.C.: The Center for Applied Research in Education, 1963, pp. 90-91.

[17]John J. Corson. The Governance of Colleges and Universities. New York: Mc-Graw-Hill Book Co., 1960, p. 150.

[18]Stanley Idzerda. "Academic Rigor" in Twenty-five Years: 1945-1970 edited by G. Kerry Smith. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1970, p. 105.

[19]Ibid., pp. 106-107.

[20]Ibid., pp. 109-110.

[21]Dressel and DeLisle, Undergraduate Curriculum Trends, p. 2.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Logan Wilson. "Form and Function in American Higher Education" in Emerging Patterns in American Higher Education edited by Logan Wilson. Washington, D.C.: The American Council on Education, 1967, pp. 31-32.

[24]Ibid., p. 32.

[25]Dressel, The Undergraduate Curriculum in Higher Education, pp. 42-43.

[26]Lewis B. Mayhew. The Smaller Liberal Arts College. Washington, D.C.: The Center for Applied Research in Education, 1962, pp. 52-53.

[27]Dressel, The Undergraduate Curriculum in Higher Education, pp. 44-45.

[28]Ibid., p. 63.

[29]DeVane, "The College of Liberal Arts," p. 10.

[30]Faust, "Specialization and Liberat Arts," p. 48.

[31]Dressel and DeLisle, Undergraduate Curriculum Trends, p. 2.

[32]Mayhew, The Smaller Liberal Arts College, p. 43.

[33]Ibid., p. 53.

[34]Dressel, "The Undergraduate Curriculum Models for Undergraduate Education," p. 144.

[35]Dressel, "A Look at New Curriculum Models for Undergraduate Education," p. 144.

[36]"The College Curriculum: Just a Passing Grade" in Change. New Rochelle, N.Y.: The Council on Learning, February, 1978, p. 14.

[37]GEM Newsletter. Washington, D.C.: Project on General Education Models, February, 1979, p. 1.

[38]COMP PROSPECTUS. Iowa City, Iowa: The American College Testing Program, College Outcome Measures Project, 1979, p. 1.

[39] Alternatives. Washington, D.C.: The American Association of State Colleges and Universities, April, 1979, pp. 2-3.

[40] Alexander Astin. The American Freshman: The National Norms for Fall, 1977. Washington, D.C.: The American Council on Education.

[41] William Cook and James Gonyea. "Measurable Outcomes in the Liberal Arts." Moravia, N.Y.: Chronicle Guidance Publications, 1978, pp. 1-2.

[42] David B. Truman. "Relevance of Liberal Arts" in Twenty-five Years: 1945-1970 edited by G. Kerry Smith. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1970, pp. 252-253.

[43] Ibid.